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ABSTRACT

A multifaceted study using both qualitative and quantitative methods examined the expectations of college life of first-time freshmen and then checked 4 years later at their graduation to determine how well they felt those expectations were met. Incoming freshmen wrote an essay detailing expectations, and shortly before graduation wrote another essay evaluating how well their expectations were met. There were a total of 40 students for whom both essays were available. Results from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey were compared with senior results on the College Student Survey (CSS) for an additional 207 seniors. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data provided a comprehensive view of the college experiences of this group. Results for the two methodologies were similar in most areas and are discussed in terms of academic, personal, and social expectations. (Author/SLD)

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Four Years Later: Qualitative and Quantitative Assessment of the Changes in the Class of 2001

Abstract

A multi-faceted study using both qualitative and quantitative methods examined the expectations of college life of first-time freshmen and then checked four years later at their graduation to determine how well they felt those expectations were met. Incoming freshmen wrote an essay detailing expectations, and shortly before graduation wrote another essay evaluating how well their expectations were met. Results from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey were compared with senior results on the College Student Survey (CSS). The combination of qualitative and quantitative data provided a comprehensive view of the college experiences of this group. Results for the two methodologies were similar in most areas and are discussed in terms of academic, personal and social expectations.

Four Years Later: Qualitative and Quantitative Assessment of the Changes in the Class of 2001

Colleges and universities are involved in a constant process of assessment for evaluation purposes. Basic foundations as well as day-to-day practices are fluid and need to be informed by prospective students, current students and alumni. Although there are a number of reasons for the institution of the University to exist, the major goal is the development of student talents (Astin, 1993, 1991). Given this student focus, there must be multiple means to assess student expectations, progress and satisfaction.

Research dealing with student expectations for college has typically used questionnaires and large samples. Krallman and Holcomb (1997) found that incoming freshmen generally have unrealistic academic, personal and social expectations. Some assessments of student satisfaction with college experiences have also used quantitative surveys. Keup (1999) reported results from a sample of over 9,000 students from 121 institutions. She identified student types of value orientation and related these types to satisfaction. For example, materialistic students and students who expect to drop out are less satisfied. House (1998) conducted similar research and found that those students with higher academic success were more satisfied with the college experience.

The purpose of the present longitudinal study was to examine the expectations of college life of first-time freshmen at the University and to check four years later at their graduation to determine how well they felt those expectations were met. Additionally, the University wanted to learn how students, in fact, changed academically and otherwise during their four years in college.

Methods

The target institution was a small private liberal arts university in a southeastern state. It will be referred to in this document as the University. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to obtain the maximum amount of information from students. When analyzed separately and together, multiple data sources supported each other and provided a verification of many of the outcomes. This mixed methodology generated data that was broader and richer than that from either of the single data sources.

The qualitative data came from essay analysis. Virtually all of the 967 incoming freshmen for fall, 1997, wrote an essay describing their expectations of themselves and of the University. Shortly before graduation, in April 2001, a random sample of 200 of these same students were given a copy of their freshman essay and asked to write a senior essay evaluating their college experience in terms of whether these expectations were met. There were a total of 40 senior essays returned, for a return rate of 20%. Three researchers independently analyzed both sets of essays. Themes were identified, and all issues mentioned by two or more students were included in the report.

Large-scale surveys provided the quantitative portion of the data. At the beginning of the freshman year, students took the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA. In spring, 2001, the 620 graduating seniors who were not asked to complete the senior essay were asked to complete the senior survey, the College Student Survey (CSS), also from HERI at UCLA. A total of 207 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 33%. HERI provided three data sets that are used in this study. First, the CSS

results for all University respondents were reported, along with comparison to two norm groups: Private Universities and All Institutions. Private Universities consisted of the results of seniors taking the 2001 CSS at eight Private Universities while All Institutions consisted of the Private Universities plus 138 other 4+ year institutions. Second, HERI reported results comparing the senior CSS results with CIRP Freshman Survey results for the University cohort. The third set of survey data came from a small number of supplemental questions submitted by the University and included on the CSS with no comparison group.

Results are organized around the three broad themes identified from the essays. Both qualitative and quantitative data are reported in this framework.

Academic Expectations

Classes

In the freshman essays, several students mentioned that they had chosen this University because of the University's prestige and academic excellence. Students named academic achievement as their major goal, and several hoped to develop better study habits. One of the major expectations they mentioned was that the University would offer challenging classes, and they planned to take a rigorous schedule. The senior essays clearly verified that the University met this expectation. Students reported that they were challenged, that the academic atmosphere was competitive, and that they had to work hard for good grades. A senior reported, "Although I made Dean's List every semester, there was not a single semester when I didn't truly believe I would fail out of this school! I have been challenged beyond what I thought possible, and my achievements mean the world to me because I know how hard I had to strive for them."

On the CSS, 64% of University seniors reported that professors frequently provided them with intellectual challenge, as compared to 45% at Private Universities and 43% at All Institutions. The percentage of senior students who reported that they studied 16 or more hours per week for University seniors was 35%; while seniors at Private Universities reported 30% and seniors at All Institutions reported 23%.

Grades

In the freshman essays, students were asked to predict their grade point average at graduation. As recent high school graduates, they were very confident about grades, with the majority of predictions above a 3.5 grade point average. Several did mention that this was an unfair question because they had not yet been inside a college classroom. This argument was repeated on the senior essays, and only 10 of the 40 students met or exceeded their predictions for grade point average. Students said that college courses were much more challenging than high school, and several acknowledged that they had no idea how to study before college.

They felt, as seniors, that grades were not so important, and that their education involved more than the grade point average reflected. One senior said, "I am not disappointed that I was unable to reach the 4.0. The spirit of my original expectation was that I would study and perform to the best of my capabilities. In this I have succeeded." Seniors wrote about the need to balance their time among social, service and academic activities. Several students felt that they had gained skills and experiences equal in value with course grades, "My inner GPA is probably a lot higher than my GPA from my classes, and that is something that I am very proud of." One senior described his

freshman dread of the workload and shared his academic success in surpassing his expected grade point average and graduating *cum laude*.

On the CSS/CIRP Surveys, 61% of freshmen expected a grade point average of B or better, and 93% of the seniors reported a grade point average of B or better. Only one % of freshman expected to fail one or more classes, and 12 % of seniors reported failing one or more classes. Even though this appears to conflict with the essay results, one difference in the survey and essay data is in the level of grades addressed. The survey question dealt with "B or better" and the essay comments were directed to "A" grades. Even then, a small percentage of the survey students expected "B or better" which would include "A" grades. With the current trends of grade inflation at many colleges and universities, a difference in definition of academic success may be reflected. Further research is suggested.

Professors

Quite a few students mentioned professors in the freshman essay. In addition to offering challenging courses, they expected professors to be helpful, caring, friendly and to give them individual attention. A large majority of the senior essays concluded that this expectation was met. Students reported that they respected their professors for their academic knowledge and appreciated their personal interest in guiding and teaching them. A senior related, "If you seek out any teacher, they are not going to turn you away." Another senior said, "I found professors who inspired and challenged me, and with whom I formed meaningful bonds from my very first semester freshman year." Another said, "I can honestly say that I have never had a bad professor at the University."

And still another senior said, "An area that exceeded my expectations was the accessibility of professors outside the classroom."

A few students did express disappointment in their professors. A small number of seniors felt that it was difficult to develop relationships with professors. For example, one senior wrote, "I was disappointed with some professors and found they were not approachable." One student said, "I was not very impressed." The complaints centered on some professors' lack of communication and motivation skills. In some cases, students shared stories of contested grades and heavy workloads that intruded on social time. Some students stated that overall professors far exceeded their expectations, but then related one or two instances where they felt that they had not been treated in a caring and fair manner.

On the CSS, 94% of University students reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall quality of instruction, far surpassing the comparison groups (81% at Private Universities and 81% at All Institutions). Similarly, 91% of University students reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the amount of contact with faculty (as compared with 75% at Private Universities and 76% at All Institutions). Also, 87% of University seniors reported that they had visited in a professor's home, while 45% at Private Universities and 41% at All Institutions reported such visits.

Achievement

The essays reflected that students felt they had been well educated. They felt that they were more independent thinkers and were more open-minded. One student stated, "My wide variety of study … has prepared me to live in the real world, no matter what

my occupation." Another mentioned being "prepared in abstract ways for the real world" and developing "problem-solving skills."

The CSS showed that University seniors surpassed peer groups on items reporting "much stronger abilities and skills compared to when they first started college." The following areas show this pattern: Knowledge of particular discipline (University 75%; Private Universities 65%; All Institutions 59%), General Knowledge (University 52%; Private Universities 49%; All Institutions 45%), Computer Skills (University 52%; Private Universities 44%; All Institutions 37%), Writing Skills (University 36%; Private Universities 27%; All Institutions 30%), Foreign Language Study (University 16%; Private Universities 11%; All Institutions 11%). University students fell behind peer institutions only in mathematical skills, which might be expected at a liberal arts University (University 5%; Private Universities 15%; All Institutions 13%).

On the essays, students addressed some specific features of the academic program. Students commented positively about the first-year seminar, a required course that involves critical thinking and communication of ideas. They felt that this was a good opportunity for exploration in a nurturing atmosphere. Here, many found lasting interests, "My freshman seminar clinched my decision of a major." No survey items were related to the first-year seminar.

Also in the academic area, several freshmen shared that they were looking forward to study-abroad opportunities. The senior essays verified that this expectation was met, and that a large percentage of the students in the sample had studied abroad. They spoke very positively about these experiences, and some said this was the highlight of their college career. A student wrote, "I enjoyed a semester abroad and I was pleased

to be in an environment where such an experience was so highly regarded." Another said, "I think I experienced more personal growth in the months spent out of the country than I did during all of my semesters in residence." Students spoke of developing confidence from their world travels. One senior said that the abroad experience "expanded my outlook and resolutely changed me forever."

A supplemental question on the CSS asked students to evaluate the significance of study abroad as a part of their education. A total of 86% of the seniors who had studied abroad reported that this experience was significant or very significant.

Technology

The final academic area mentioned in the freshman essays was technology. On the CSS, seniors were asked about their satisfaction with technology. Compared to peer groups, larger percents of University seniors were satisfied or very satisfied with Availability of Internet Access (University 95%; Private Universities 83%; All Institutions 79%), Computer Facilities (University 94%; Private Universities 73%; All Institutions 69%), and Quality of Computer Assistance (University 78%; Private Universities 49%; All Institutions 49%). Additionally, a supplemental question asked University seniors "To What Degree Did the Use of Technology in Classes Add to Your Learning Experience and Master of the Course Material?" A total of 86% of the seniors reported a great deal or somewhat.

Several of the incoming freshmen were excited about the technology program and expected this to be a major part of their education. Fewer of the senior essays mentioned computers; those that did were overwhelmingly pleased that they had learned so much about technology. Some students mentioned that this "incidental" learning would be a

major plus in their job search. A senior wrote, "I expected to become well-educated about modern technology at the University so that when I applied for internships and when I graduated I would be competitive and able to keep up in the real world. This was met and exceeded." Another senior summarized, "The availability of a computer is one of the University's greatest attributes." Another senior stated, "Having these laptops has opened up a whole new world to things I never knew about before." Still another student reported positively, "I now have confidence when using computers, which I did not have prior to my arrival at the University."

Thus, in academics, the seniors felt that expectations were met or exceeded. They reported that the University had provided excellent classes and professors, and specifically highlighted three outstanding features: first-year seminars, study abroad programs, and technology opportunities.

Personal Expectations

Friends

As incoming freshmen, many of the students expressed expectations as personal goals. Over half of the 40 freshman essays mentioned that they wished to make friends at the University. This expectation was met, with several seniors mentioning "life-long friendships." A student said, "I feel like my ability to have friends and be a friend has grown. The University has made me a better person." Another student stated, "Some of the most incredible friends I have ever known are the ones I met at the University. I could not imagine life without these people now. I also noted (in the Freshman essay) that I hoped to meet my future wife on campus. To my knowledge, this hasn't happened

yet." Another student summarized, "I did make friends. I have become more outgoing, agreeable, sophisticated, well-rounded, and confident."

On the CSS, larger percentages of University seniors reported being satisfied or very satisfied with Interaction with Other Students (University 87%; Private Universities; 83%; All Institutions 82%). A total of 35% of the University seniors rated themselves as much stronger in interpersonal skills compared to when they first started college. This percentage for Private Universities was 31% and for All Institutions was 30%. These data support the essay results in showing that students did meet their goals of making friends.

Independence

Another major expectation of incoming freshmen was that they would gain independence and become an adult during their four years of college. An incoming student realized that he would "become my own parent, teacher, and disciplinarian in many ways," and another knew that responsibility would be necessary because "my parents and teachers will not always be there to tell me what to do or how to act, to make me go to every class or to wake me up every day." Most seniors felt that this expectation was accomplished, with varied credit given to the University. One student stated that the University was not a part of this maturation process, but that "being away from home forced me to learn how to do certain things on my own." A student said, "Freshman year taught me the self-confidence that makes me who I am." Another student reported, "I feel more independent, more intelligent, more confident, and an overall stronger person." Still another said, "I was able to learn who I am, and what I want in life."

On the CSS/CIRP, 81% of University seniors rated themselves above average or higher in Understanding of Others, while only 72% of the group expressed this rating as freshmen; 72% of seniors, compared to 68% as freshmen, rated their Leadership Ability as above average or higher while 62% of seniors, compared to 52% as freshmen, reported that their self-confidence was above average or higher. Again, the two data sources agree; students did feel they had become more independent.

Moral/Religious Growth

A number of freshmen expressed an expectation that they would experience moral and religious growth. They hoped that they would maintain high moral standards when faced with the "temptations" of college life. The senior essays confirmed that this expectation was met for those students who addressed it. Some students reported this growth in a broad sense, such as the student who related, "[Through participation in Young Life ministry] I have realized that God may be calling me to ministry." Another senior said, "I believe my spiritual development has remained center stage. As a member of the Baptist Student Union, I have developed the ability to question, to think through matters and most importantly, define my faith and relationship with God." Still another said, "I was exposed to various religious practices different from my own and I was able to grow in my own faith and become more aware of my personal beliefs by drawing boundaries according to what I did not believe."

Other students related their moral development issues more specifically. One said, "I have encountered challenges to my character that have required personal growth, and I appreciate those experiences." Another student summarized the University's role, "The sense of security and values within the world is preserved by the University's honor

code." Additionally, another student said, "By being a Christian and a leader in a Christian organization, I had to figure out for myself exactly what my beliefs were and what position I took regarding some ethically challenging situations."

The CSS/CIRP results showed slightly different results. Student ratings of their spirituality decreased from 56% of freshmen rating themselves above average, to 51% as seniors. On the CSS, 13% of University seniors reported much stronger religious beliefs/communications compared to when they first started college. Private University seniors reported 14% and seniors at All Institutions reported 15%. These differences are small and may only indicate sampling differences, but further investigation might provide interesting findings.

Career

On the CSS/CIRP, the number of students changing major field and career choice was more than doubled for seniors as compared to their freshman expectations. A total of 24% of the freshmen expected to change major field, and 55% of seniors reported that they actually did. Similarly, 25% of freshmen expected to change career choice; and 57% of seniors reported that they did change career choice.

This personal issue was mentioned by several students in the essay as they discussed their selection of a major or career. It is interesting that this career guidance was no longer expected from family and friends, but they expected it from University personnel, "I am undecided on a major, and I hope that if something does not jump out at me, someone on campus will help me make a good choice." Seniors reported that they had received ample guidance from faculty and career services personnel in choosing

career, graduate school, and employment paths. A student said, "I have found my passion in life..."

Health and Safety

A final area of personal expectations was health and safety. Students expected the University to provide a safe and comfortable living environment, and this expectation appeared to be satisfied. Some incoming students expressed a desire to maintain a healthy lifestyle by being involved in physical activities and healthy eating habits. All students who mentioned this issue felt that the University had met this expectation by providing "workout" facilities and food service alternatives. One senior said, "I have stayed physically active through intramural activities, personal exercise, and classes offered."

On a less positive note, there were mentions of stress and tension in several student essays. One student worried about "countless eating disorders, depression, and anxiety" on campus. Other students also mentioned stressful competition, seeing some students "obsessed with high grades and resumé building activities." One student complimented the University Counseling Center and also encouraged the campus community to be more aware of mental and emotional health issues.

The CSS/CIRP results indicated that University seniors reported that they were less healthy both physically and emotionally after four years. A total of 68% of the freshmen, and only 59% of seniors, rated themselves as above average or higher in physical health. In emotional health, 71% of freshmen rated themselves as above average or higher, and only 66% of seniors reported that rating.

In personal growth, the seniors felt that they had met their expectations. They made friends, and they felt that they had grown more independent and self-confident, which many called "becoming an adult." Several reported religious and moral growth through experiences and reflection, even though survey ratings of spirituality declined slightly. Most reported that their expectation of finding a career was met, and that the University had met their expectation in facilitating this process. Many reported changing career choices. They also felt that the University had generally met their expectations of providing a healthy and safe environment. There were suggestions about a need for more attention to mental health issues of students, who may be stressed, anxious, or depressed.

Social Expectations

Diversity

CSS data showed that University seniors were less positive than comparison groups in diversity areas. Only 14% of University seniors reported that they were much stronger in knowledge of different races/cultures than when starting college, as compared to 18% at Private Universities and 20% at All Institutions. Similarly, only 12% of University seniors reported much stronger abilities to get along with different races/cultures, as compared with 18% at Private Universities and 20% at All Institutions. CSS/CIRP results showed that 71% of freshmen had socialized with other racial/ethnic groups in the high school senior year, and only 40% of seniors had similar experiences during the college senior year.

As noted above, many incoming students had "making friends" as a primary expectation, and this expectation was met. However, nearly half of the freshman essays mentioned that they expected the University to have diversity in the student body.

Recognizing their narrow backgrounds, students wanted interaction with people of different cultural, socio-economic and religious groups. They expected the opportunity, as one student put it "to meet people from all over the world." A large number of the seniors felt that this expectation was not met. They described the campus as a "homogeneous and restrictive community" and as an "extremely expensive, homogenous country club." The student population was repeatedly described as "homogenous" and "closed-minded." One student stated, "The atmosphere was very conservative. The gatehouses separating us from the larger community seemed to not only be a physical reality, but a state of mind as well." Another said, "I have found that being an ethnic minority on this campus also pushes one 'to the fringes.'"

Club Activities

Another major expectation in the social area was activities, including service organizations, cultural events and athletic events. Most of the incoming students mentioned being very active in organizations, teams and clubs as high school students, and expected the same level of involvement at the University. They expected to have a wide variety of opportunities, such as cultural events, athletic events, parties and other social activities. The majority of the seniors said that the University had provided a satisfactory or even an exceptional number of extracurricular opportunities. Some students stated that there were so many choices in terms of extracurricular activities that they regretted that they had not been able to participate in more of those activities. One student said, "I found more extracurricular activities that interested me than I could participate in, but chose a few that proved to be significant and meaningful for me." Another student stated that "becoming more involved in campus organizations and

holding leadership positions" facilitated her growth. A student felt that extracurricular activities were very valuable, "By participating in these organizations and activities, I feel I have learned much about interacting with people and accepting or respecting their different philosophies and lifestyles."

The CSS/CIRP data show that more students participated in athletics than they expected (freshmen 9% and seniors 19%), and that more students were elected to student offices than expected (freshmen 4% and seniors 17%). On the CSS, 43% of University seniors reported that they spent three or more hours in a typical week participating in student clubs/organizations, as compared to 25% at Private Universities and 22% at All Institutions.

Volunteer Activities

One interesting expectation of several freshmen was that they wanted to participate in volunteer service activities. Many of the seniors reported that they had met this expectation volunteering throughout the community. One student who was a leader in the Volunteer Service Corps felt rewarded and satisfied by this experience. Another said, "I realize I could have done much more meaningful things with my time. I wish I had volunteered more."

On the CSS/CIRP, 91% of freshmen reported performing volunteer work during the senior year in high school; and 86% of them reported the same work during their senior year of college. On the CSS, 85% of University students reported being satisfied or very satisfied with chances for community service as compared to 77% from Private Universities, and 67% from All Institutions. A total of 20% of the University seniors

reported on the CSS that they spent three or more hours in a typical week doing volunteer work, as compared with 16% at Private Universities and 17% at All Institutions.

Cultural Activities

The freshman essays revealed the hope of incoming students that the University would offer a wide variety of cultural activities, such as concerts, lectures, and seminars. The seniors were satisfied with these events. One student reported, "I attended many concerts, plays, convocations, University chapel services, and other events offered on campus, and I am grateful for the cultural opportunities available within the University."

Many of the freshmen identified the University as a nationally known sports power, and expressed their expectation of an environment of school spirit. In the senior essay, many seniors felt that school spirit was lacking. Only a few of the seniors felt that the University had promoted school spirit. However, the few who considered themselves "fans" were very complimentary about these experiences. They felt that being a part of the athletic successes were among their best moments at the University.

Social Activities

Although it was not specifically mentioned on the freshman essays, many senior essays expressed dissatisfaction with the general social atmosphere on campus. Common complaints were the lack of social opportunities outside the Greek system, the lack of social opportunities in general, and the party management system. Several students specifically said that they were unhappy with the alcohol policy and that they believed the University's strict alcohol policy stifled the social atmosphere.

CSS/CIRP results showed that 37% of freshmen planned to join a fraternity or sorority, and 57% of seniors reported that they did so. On the CSS, 42% of University

seniors reported that they spent six or more hours in a typical week partying, as compared with 37% at Private Universities and 29% at All Institutions. On the CSS/CIRP, 52% of freshmen reported that they drank beer and 58% reported that they drank wine or liquor during the senior year of high school. For the senior year of college, 75% reported drinking beer and 88% reported drinking wine or liquor. This large increase may be due in part to their reaching the legal drinking age.

The seniors' evaluation of social expectations was the least positive and was mostly attributed to the University. One major issue was identified by a large number of students who complained about the lack of diversity in the student population. Seniors were also negative about the general social climate, and many expressed their frustration at the strict alcohol policies. On the other hand, students felt that the University had met and exceeded their expectations for providing a wide variety of service, cultural, and athletic activities.

Summary

The incoming freshmen had high expectations for both themselves and for the University in the areas of academics, personal growth, and social opportunities. When they reflected on these expectations and their experiences after four years, most seniors felt that most expectations were met. They were happy with their classes and professors, and with their academic progress. They felt that they had matured and made friends, and that they had grown in their religious life as well as toward a career path. They were pleased with the variety and numbers of activities offered by the University, but would have liked a more diverse student body, more non-Greek social opportunities, and a more liberal alcohol policy. Issues common to both the essay and survey results can be

categorized under "challenges" as alcohol/partying, diversity and non-Greek while under "strengths" as academics, technology and volunteer/clubs.

Conclusions

Freshman expectations and senior reflections from both essay and survey data sources were compared and analyzed in this study. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data provided a comprehensive view of the college experience of this cohort of students. For the most part, the essay and survey results were consistent but yet provided more useful assessment information together as opposed to having just essay or survey results. Perhaps another important outcome of this study was the identification of issues for further study. Efforts should continue to assess and evaluate the academic, personal and social experiences of University students through both qualitative and quantitative assessment.

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